

George Manville Fenn

"The King's Sons"

Chapter One.

Sons of the King.

The sun shone down hotly on the hill-side, and that hill was one of a range of smooth rolling downs that ought to have been called ups and downs, from the way they seemed to rise and fall like the sea on a fine calm day.

Not quite, for at such a time the sea looks as blue as the sky above it, while here on this particular hot day, though the sky was as blue as a sapphire stone, the hills were of a beautiful soft green, the grass being short and soft, and as velvety as if Nature had been all over it regularly with her own particular mowing-machine.

But the only mowing that had been done to that grass was by the cropping teeth of the many flocks of sheep whose fleeces dotted the downs with soft white where they nibbled away, watched by the shepherds in their long smock frocks with turn-down collars and pleatings and gatherings on breast and back, and slit up at the sides from the bottom so as to give the men's legs room to move freely when they ran after a restive sheep to hook him with the long crook they carried and bring him kicking and struggling by hook or by crook to the grass.

It was just over a thousand years ago, and, in spite of all the changes fashion has made, plenty of shepherds and farm labourers still wear the simple old Saxon dress then worn by King Ethelwulf's serfs, though without the girdle worn then.

There were four boys on the steepest slope of that hill-side—four fair-haired, sun-browned, hearty-looking boys—and they wore smock frocks, belted in at the waist, of fine, soft, woollen material, woven out of the fleeces of the sheep; for they were King's sons, the sons of the King whose flocks were feeding on the hill-side in Berkshire, where he had his Court.

It was as peaceful there as it was soft and beautiful; for though news came from time to time of the cruel acts of the fierce

Norsemen who had come across the sea in their great row and sailing galleys full of fighting-men, they were far away from the King's home, so that Queen Osburga felt no anxiety about her boys being out on the downs at play, enjoying themselves and growing strong. This she loved to see; though, being a very learned woman herself in days when noble people thought no shame to have to say: "I cannot read or write," she sighed to find how very little her four sons cared for such things as gave her delight.

They all loved to be out in the open air along with Cerda, the Saxon jarl, one of the King's chief fighting-men, who urged them to learn how to use the broadsword. After setting one of the men to make swords for the boys—not of hard cutting steel, but of good tough ash-wood—and then matching them two against two, he would sit and roar with laughter at the blows they gave and took.

"Well done! At him again!" he cried. "Another wound; but it will not bleed."

It was Cerda, too, who had bows and arrows made for the boys, whilst King Ethelwulf would look on, sometimes smiling and sometimes sighing, for he cared nothing for these things.

"But we must have fighting-men, Swythe," he said, to a little plump, rosy-looking monk in a long gown held tightly to his waist by a knotted rope, which cut in a good way, for the monk was very fat.

"Oh, but fighting's bad, sir, very bad," said the monk, passing one of his hands round and round over his shining, closely-shaven crown.

"Very bad," said King Ethelwulf. "I hate it; but you know what the Danes have done to so many of your holy house—killing, burning, and carrying off everything that is good."

The monk screwed up his face, shook his head, and sighed, while the rosy little man looked so droll that the King smiled.

"Look here, Swythe," he said, "suppose a horde of the savage wretches came up here to plunder my pleasant home, what would you do?"

"Hah!" said the monk. "I am a man of peace, sir; I should run away."

"And leave the Queen and my boys and me to be killed or taken prisoners?"

"Hah! No," said the monk. "I couldn't do that. I'm afraid I should take the biggest staff I could lift—or a sword—or an axe—and—and if either of the wretches tried to touch our good Queen or either of my dear boys I should hit him as hard as ever I could."

"With the club?" said the King.

"No; I should strike him down with the axe, sir."

"But you might kill him, Swythe."

"And if I did, sir," said the little monk fiercely, "it would be a good thing too; for these Norsemen are wicked pagans, come to kill and slay."

"You see, we must have fighting-men, Swythe," said the King; and then he turned to the Queen, who was listening to what they said.

"Hah! yes, sir," said the monk, with a sigh. "I suppose we must; and it does my heart good to see how clever the young Princes are with sword and bow; but they spend too much time learning to fight. If they would only spend half the time learning with me!"

"Yes, it would be good," said Queen Osburga sadly.

"But they don't," continued the monk. "There's only young Alured—Alfred, as you call him—who will learn at all, and he is nearly as idle as his brothers."

"You cannot say that they are idle," said the Queen, smiling gently.

"Well, perhaps not idle, my daughter," said the monk, shaking his head, "because they do work hard to learn what Jarl Cerda teaches them."

"Yes," said King Ethelwulf, "they are apt to learn how to fight; but you must make them learned, as kings should be, so as to rule wisely and well when the Danes have killed me and they are called upon to reign."

"The Danes never shall kill you, sir," cried the little monk fiercely, "so long as I can stand in their way."

The little group now separated, for the King and Queen had many duties to perform in connection with state affairs, and the little monk had to prepare the lessons for the boys.

And that's how matters were on that bright sunny day when King Ethelwulf's sons lay out on the steep hill-side—Bald, Bert, Red, and Fred—four as crisp and tongue-tripping names as four bright Saxon English boys could own, but each with the addition of Athel or Ethel before, except the youngest, in whose name it shortened into Al; and these were their titles, because each was a Prince.

Chapter Two.

"Boys will be Boys."

One of the boys' amusements had been for one to shoot an arrow as high up as he could, and for his brothers to follow and try and hit the first one sent. Fine practice this in marksmanship, but unsatisfactory and tiring after a few tries, for the arrows flew far, and this time they had brought no young serfs' sons to retrieve the arrows, one of which took a long time to find.

But it was found at last, just as the head of a man appeared above the distant ridge; and the boys stopped to look, the head being followed by the shoulders and breast of the man, while behind him there was a fringe of something bright and shimmering in the sunshine.

The next minute the boys began to run, for they saw that the object first seen was a mounted man, and what followed the heads of spears borne by a party of quite a hundred men, whose leader had been seen first owing to his being mounted upon an active little horse.

"Where's Cerda going?" shouted one of the boys.

"There's a fight somewhere," said another.

And the other two joined in, crying together:

"Let's go and see."

So, in a state of wild excitement and wonder that they had not heard the news of danger before, the boys raced to head off the body of armed men, the first up being greeted by the big bluff leader with a cheery shout.

"What now? What now?" he cried. "Have you boys come to tell us that we are too late, and that the enemy are all slain? Who was it found the Norsemen's ship?"

"Then the Danes have landed?" cried the eldest boy excitedly.

"Yes," cried his brother. "I knew that was it."

"Yes, that's it, boy," said the leader, dragging at his horse's head, for the animal was impatient to go on.

"Where are they?" cried the youngest boy, with his cheeks flushing and eyes sparkling.

"A day's journey away, my boy. The people over Farrington way have asked for help, and the King sends me."

"That's right," cried the boy who had last spoken. "We'll go with you."

The leader smiled and shook his head, and the band of fine-looking, picked men indulged in a hearty laugh.

"What are you mocking and gibing at?" cried the youngest boy fiercely. "Do you think that because I and my brothers are young we cannot fight?"

"Yes," cried the eldest brother; "we can shoot an arrow with any of you. Pick out your four best men, Jarl Cerda, and we'll shoot against them."

"Yes," said another. "You know we can shoot well."

"Do I not?" said the jarl; "for I taught you."

"Yes, yes; they can all shoot well," came in concert.

"Oh, yes, they can shoot," said the leader; "but I have no time to prove it."

"Of course not," cried Alfred. "Never mind that. Lead on."

"I'm afraid we should never catch the Danes if you boys came," said the jarl solemnly.

"Why?" cried Bald, the eldest.

"Yes, why shouldn't we?" cried Ethelred.

"Don't ask him," said Alfred, frowning.

"Why?"

"Look at his eyes and the corners of his mouth. He's laughing at us."

The big jarl's shoulders began to shake, and his lids half-closed in his mirth, while the eyes of all four boys flashed in their anger.

"Why, of course I'm laughing, my boys," he said; "but it's not out of a desire to mock at you. I know you, my brave little fellows, and I hope to come back safe, and to see you all grow up to stark men who will deal well with the Norsemen. But you must wait a bit."

"No, no," cried Alfred. "We can stand back and shoot."

"So can the Danes, my boy; and their arrows are sharp."

"But we can shoot sharper and quicker than they," said Ethelred. "Oh, do take us, Jarl Cerda."

"No, my boy," said the stout Saxon noble firmly; "I cannot take you. The King stood by and picked out my men, and he said I was to take these and no more. Would you have me give pain to our good Queen Osburga by breaking the King's commands?"

"No," said Alfred, with a quick, old-fashioned look. "We cannot do that, boys."

"Come, that's bravely spoken, Alfred, boy; I like that," said the jarl, leaning down from his horse to pat the youngest boy on the shoulder. "Look here, if I come back safely after beating the Danes I'll bring you one of their winged helmets for a prize."

"You will?" cried Alfred.

"I promise you I will, my boy," cried the big Saxon noble, "and trophies for your brothers too.—There, we must go on. Good-bye, my brave boys. Give them a shout, my lads."

The men waved sword and spear in the air as they marched off and Alfred and his brothers stood watching them till the last twinkling spear had disappeared in the distance, and then the boys turned away with a sigh.

"Oh, I wish I was a man!" said Alfred sadly.

"No use to wish," said the next brother. "Here, let's go on down the stream to get some fish."

The disappointment was soon forgotten, and the boys dashed off downhill as hard as they could go, neither of them hearing a shout, nor seeing the little monk come panting up, to stand gazing ruefully after them and wiping the great drops of perspiration off his face and head.

"Oh, dear!" he said; "it's a fine thing to be young and strong, and—"

He paused for a few moments to look down at his plump proportions.

"—And light," he added sadly. "I can't run as they do."

He stood perfectly still as he spoke, watching the deep crease in the valley, whose bottom was hidden by clumps of willow and beds of reeds with their dark purple waving blooms.

"I suppose I must go after them," he sighed. "What can they want down there?"

The little monk sighed again and then started off to follow the boys, trying hard to walk slowly and steadily; but it was all in vain. The hill-side sloped very steeply to the broad bed of willows and reeds far below, making the way very bad for so heavy and inactive a man. Worse still: walking over the short grass in the hot sun had made the bottoms of the monk's sandals as slippery as glass, and so it was that before he had gone far down the slope he began to talk to himself, at first slowly—then quickly—then in a loud excited way—and lastly he uttered a shout and a cry for help.

"Here," he said, at first, "I want to go down slowly. It's too hot to walk fast. Steady! Why, I am going faster!"

Then there was a minute's pause, and the monk cried excitedly:

"I don't want to run." Then: "Oh, dear me, however am I to stop myself?" And directly after: "Oh, do stop me, somebody, or I shall be broken all to bits." And lastly: "Here, help, help, help!"

Then there was a loud crashing sound, some water flew up, the monk uttered a final "Oh!" and lay perfectly still, listening, for all at once a familiar voice cried:

"Oh, come here, quick! A sheep has gone plosh into the pool."

Boys were as much boys then as they are now, for directly after these words were uttered Alfred—the Little then—came hurrying as fast as the water would let him wade—splash, splash, splash!—from where he and his brothers had been busily making a dam across the little stream to turn the rushing water aside into another channel so as to leave the unfortunate trout helpless and ready for capture, and as soon as he caught sight of his teacher lying perfectly still he burst into a fit of hearty laughter.

"Come and look! Come and look!" he shouted.

His brothers wanted no further telling, but came splashing up out of the stream to the open shallow muddy bed where the reeds grew, and as soon as they saw the monk's condition they began to indulge in a bare-legged triumphal war-dance, shrieking with laughter the while.

"Bad boys; bad, thoughtless, wicked boys!" grunted Father Swythe; but he lay perfectly still with arms and legs spread apart as far as they would go.

"Why don't you stand up and walk out?" cried Fred, at last, taking compassion on his tutor's awkward plight.

"Because I'm so heavy, boy: I should sink."

"Oh, no. It isn't deep there. I've often waded about there to look for moorhens' nests."

"Yes, my boy; but you're young and light. I'm very heavy."

"Yes," cried one of the others, in high delight; "there's an arrow depth of water where you are, and quite a bow length of thick mud under that."

"Oh, dear!" groaned the monk; "don't laugh at me, my boys. Can't you help me out?"

"Yes, I'll get you out," cried Alfred, and he waded towards his unfortunate tutor, trampling the reeds down with his bare feet, but sinking in up to his knees at every step.

"Mind you don't get into a hole, Fred!" cried Bald.

"Mind the big luces!" shouted Bert. "There's a monster lives among those reeds."

"Oh, they all swam away when Father Swythe fell in," cried Red. "You have got to mind your toes. The big eels are down amongst the mud."

The monk groaned at this, and raised his dripping hands above the water, to grasp with each a handful of reeds.

"The eels will go deeper into the mud," said Alfred sturdily. "Now then, catch hold of my hands, and I'll pull you out."

The monk raised one hand very cautiously, and Alfred seized it tightly and began to back, pulling with all his might; but he pulled in vain, for he did not move his tutor an inch.

"Here, I know," cried Alfred. "You two come and join hands and pull."

"I'm afraid I'm too heavy," said Father Swythe.

"I shan't help," said Bald maliciously. "Let him stop where he is."

The monk groaned again, and the three boys outside the reeds laughed with malicious glee.

"If we pull him out he'll only take us back and begin to teach us to read."

"Yes, yes, yes," sighed Father Swythe; "I came to fetch you in. The Queen sent me."

"Then we won't help you," said Bert; laughing. "Let's go and finish getting our fish, and then go back. When they ask where he is we'll tell them, and then some of the shepherds can come with wattle hurdles and get him out."

"Oh, dear!" groaned the monk. "After all my teaching, for you boys to be as bad as this! Why, if you leave me I shall be drowned!"

"Oh, no," said Red merrily. "You've only to keep holding your face up."

"Yes," said Bert; "and that will send your legs down till you'll be standing up in the mud and water."

"And all the big flies and things will come and buzz about and settle on your crown. Come along, Fred, and finish the dam."

"If we finish the dam," said Alfred seriously, "all the water will run in here and make it deeper."

"Well, then he can swim out. You can swim, can't you?"

"No, no, no," said the monk sadly. "I never learned."

"What a pity!" said Red, laughing.

"You ought to have learned to swim instead of learning so much Latin," cried Bert.

"There isn't time to learn everything, my boys," said the monk sadly. "I'm obliged to try and teach you all: the King and Queen sent for me that I might. Please help me out."

"We're not going to," cried Bald. "Come along, boys. He ought to have learned to swim."

Bald began to move away, and the monk groaned again.

"Come along, Fred," cried Bert, and the monk turned his head sidewise so as to look piteously at the youngest boy.

"No, I'm not coming. I'm going to stop and help Father Swythe."

"Hah!" sighed the monk, and he squeezed Alfred's hand.

"No, you're not," cried Bald fiercely; "you're coming with us. Come along. He will not sink."

"I shan't come!" said Alfred sturdily.

"What? Here, boys, let's fetch him out."

There was a rush made towards where the boy stood knee-deep, and he snatched his hand free from the monk's grasp, turned half-round, stooped a little, and as his eldest brother came wading in among the reeds he scooped up the water and saluted him with a heavy shower right in the face, drenching him so that he turned tail and hurried back, the other two laughingly backing out of reach.

"Oh, you!" shouted. Bald. "Come out, or I'll hold you right under the water till you can't breathe."

"Come along then," cried Alfred boldly, and he sent another shower of water after his brother, wetting him behind now. "You'll be just as wet as I shall first."

"You come out!"

"I shan't! You come here, if you dare!"

"Come and help me, boys," cried Bald; but the others only laughed.

"Come yourself, if you dare! Father Swythe will help me, and we'll duck you."

"Urrr!" growled Bald, stamping with rage. Then: "Never mind, boys: let them stop together. Give him a Latin lesson, Father Swythe."

"You stop a moment, all three of you," cried Alfred sharply. "You're not going away to leave Father Swythe like this. Go and fetch the big fir-pole that we laid across to begin the dam. If that's laid down here Father Swythe can pull himself out."

"Fetch it yourself!" cried Bald angrily. "We're not your serfs."

"I'm going to stop with Father Swythe," cried Alfred.

"Good boy! good boy!" whispered the monk.

"And look here," cried Alfred angrily: "it's cruel and wicked not to help him, and if you don't go I shall tell mother, and father will have you all punished severely."

"Tell, if you dare!" cried Bald, wringing out some of the water from the front of his tunic-like gown. "Come along, boys, and we'll get the fish without him."

Bald started off back to the stream, and the others followed him, the monk watching with piteous eyes till they were out of sight, when he turned his doleful, wrinkled face to his young companion, to tell him what he already knew.

"They're gone," he said sadly.

"Yes," said Alfred, laughing; "but only to fetch the fir-pole."

"Do you think so?" sighed the monk.

"Yes; they're afraid of my telling mother and making her angry. She doesn't like us to do cruel things: she'd tell us we were like the Danes. They'll come back soon with the pole, and then if you hold one end we can pull the other and draw you out. But I say, Father Swythe, you're big and strong. Don't you think if you were to try, you could get out on to the grass? Try and struggle out before they come back."

"But if I began to sink—"

"Then I should run and shout to the shepherds to come and pull you out."

"But I shouldn't like you to leave me to sink alone, my boy."

"It would be a long, long time before you were regularly mired," said the boy. "Now, you try! Give me both hands."

Father Swythe did as he was told, and, while his young companion threw himself back and dragged, the monk kicked and struggled bravely, and with such good effect that, to the surprise of both, he glided slowly through the reeds, and in less than a minute he sat up panting on the short grass, with the water streaming from the front of his gown.

"That was very brave and nice of you, my boy," he said, as he rose to his feet, "and I shall never forget it."

"Oh, it was easy enough!" said Fred, laughing. "There, let's go over the hill, and when the boys come back they'll begin poking the pole about down among the reeds, and think we're both smothered. No: here they come. Look, they're bringing the pole."

Surely enough they were; but the monk did not stop. He began trudging up hill through the hot sunshine so as to get back to take off his wet cassock and put on an old one that was dry,

Fred choosing to stay with him and to talk about the bees and birds and flowers they passed, of which the monk could talk in an interesting way, even though it was a thousand years ago.

As for the three others, they threw down the pole as soon as they saw that the monk was safe, and then followed at a distance to the big castle-like house—the palace in which the King dwelt; but there was very little reading that afternoon; for there was too much to say about the fresh attack made by the Danes, who had come up the river and landed, to ravage the country. Ethelwulf, who was not a very warlike King, was very anxious as to the result of the fight, and was busy getting more men together by means of his jarls or chiefs, so as to go to the help of those who had already set out.

In fact, instead of studying Latin and learning to write, the boys stood about learning something of the art of war, and what was to be done to defend their country when an invading enemy was ravaging the land.

Chapter Three.

Fred is left behind.

Time went on, and King Ethelwulf gathered and led off to the assistance of Jarl Cerda all the fighting-men he could assemble, as a wounded messenger had arrived from that noble, asking the King for more help, for he was sore pressed by the enemy.

The Danes, he sent word, were in great force, and more and more of their war-galleys kept coming up the river, the occupants slaying and destroying wherever they landed.

It was an anxious time for Queen Osburga, whose eyes often looked red as if she had been weeping, while her cheeks grew white and thin, and she shut herself up a great deal, so that no one should see her.

The men-folk had nearly all departed from the place, and there was no one to exercise authority, so, as soon as the four boys had recovered from their disappointment at not being allowed to go with the little army their father led, they began to look upon it as a free and jovial time in which they could do whatever pleased them most, and this they did to such an extent that poor Swythe's face became full of lines, and after

trying in vain to make his pupils continue their studies, and putting up with a great amount of disobedience on their part, he began to reproach them in his mild way. He was one of the gentlest and most amiable of men, but the wilfulness of the boys had at length compelled him to protest.

"It seems so shocking," he said, rather piteously. "I only beg and pray of you all, now that the King is at the war and our dear lady the Queen in such sorrow and trouble, to try your best to get on with your lessons, so that the King may feel proud of his sons when he returns. Ethelbald laughs and mocks at me; Ethelbert says he will not study; Ethelred follows his example; and Alfred, of whom I expected better things, has just told me he does not mind a bit what I say, and that he will do just as he likes."

"And so he shall!" said Bald boldly. "That is, he shall do as I like. Father has gone to fight the Danes, and while he's away, as I am the eldest, I shall act in his place, and shall expect everyone to obey me as if I were King."

"Oh, no, no, no," cried Swythe, looking shocked. "Our dear lady Osburga is Queen, and everyone must obey her."

"Do not speak of that to me!" cried Ethelbald. "She is only a woman, and cannot manage the men. Why, if father should be killed—"

"Which Heaven forbid!" cried Swythe, with a look of horror on his face. "Oh, dear me, Ethelbald, what a thing for you to say! Shocking, my dear boy."

"I don't want him to be killed," cried Bald. "Of course not. But if he should be killed I shall become King directly, and I shall order everybody to do what I like, and no one will dare to say a word. The first thing I shall do," he continued, with a laugh, "will be to send old Swythe away, so that there will be no more learning Latin, boys, and no crabbing fingers up to hold tens."

The three brothers said something with a shout which in those days answered to "Hooray!" and then Alfred, who had shouted the loudest, being the youngest and ready to think brother Bald's words very brave and fine, suddenly began to feel uncomfortable; for he had a certain amount of fear of the monk his master, and felt a kind of shrinking from rebelling against his authority. He glanced sidewise at Father Swythe and saw that his eyes glimmered in a peculiar way as if water was rising in them. Directly afterwards his heart felt a little sore, and a

sense of shame began to trouble him, for there was no mistake: Father Swythe's eyes were wet and his voice sounded hoarse and strange as he said sadly:

"You would not send me away, Ethelbald? I have always tried to do my duty to the young sons of my lord the King and have tried to make them grow into scholarly princes fit to rule the land."

"Bah! We do not want to be scholarly!" cried Bald scornfully. "We want to learn to be brave soldiers, so that we can go forth and beat the Danes."

"Yes," said the monk sadly; "but, my boys, the warrior who's a scholar as well is more brave and noble and merciful, and his name is one that lives longer in the land. Ah, well, you have made me very sad. I had hoped that I had done something to make the sons of my dear lady the Queen love me; but if they do not it would be better perhaps that I should go back to my cell at the old abbey, where I could be happy with my parchments and my pens."

The old monk sighed and turned away; he appeared to have received a shock which had broken his heart.

The three elder boys were laughing and joking about the matter, and suddenly Ethelbald cried out:

"Come along, boys! Bows and arrows. I saw a roebuck feeding outside the oak wood. Here, we'll take spears with us too to-day. Let old Swythe teach the swineherds' boys to read Latin instead of minding the little pigs hunting for acorns."

"No spears left!" said Bert.

"The men took them all when they went away!" said Red.

"Then let's go without!" said Bald.

Alfred said nothing; he was watching the monk going slowly and sadly away, and somehow the little figure did not look comic to him then, even if it was short and plump and round.

"Where's Fred?" cried Bald the next minute, when the boys were getting their bows and quivers.

His brothers could not tell him where Alfred was; so after a few moments pause, Ethelbald said:

"Never mind: let's go without him. Hers too young and weak to do what we do. Let him stay behind and learn Latin with old Swythe."

"He did go out after him," said Bert.

"Yes, I saw him. I remember now," cried Red.

His last words were almost smothered by his eldest brother, who raised to his lips a curling cow-horn tipped with a copper mouthpiece and strengthened with a ring at the head end. He proceeded to blow into it, but failed to produce anything more huntsman-like than a kind of bray such as might be uttered by a jackass suffering from a sore-throat.

But it was good enough to send all the dogs about the place frantic, and away the three boys went, followed by a pack of hounds, some of which would have been as ready to tackle wolf or boar as to dash after the lordly stag or the big-eyed, prong-horned, graceful roes of which there were many about the forest lands which surrounded the King's home.

Alfred, from one of the upper windows, saw them go away in triumph and longed to join them; but he did not do so, for there was sorrow in his heart, and for the first time in his young life he had begun to think deeply about the words spoken by his brother and those uttered so sadly and reproachfully by the simple-hearted, gentle monk.

Chapter Four.

A Bee in his Cell.

It was in the afternoon of that same day that young Alfred loitered about the place feeling very lonely and miserable and, truth to tell, repentant because he had not joined his brothers in the glorious chase they must be having. Taken altogether, he felt very miserable.

But he was not alone in that, for, going to the window, he saw Father Swythe walking slowly down the garden amongst the Queen's flower and herb beds, with his head bowed down and his hands behind him, looking unhappy in the extreme.

Alfred turned away, feeling guilty, and went into another room, when, to his surprise, he came suddenly upon Osburga, his mother, seated alone by her embroidery-frame, her needle and silk in her hands, but not at work.

She was sitting back thinking, with the tears slowly trickling down her cheeks.

Alfred felt that this was a most miserable day, and, with his heart feeling more sore than ever, he crept softly behind his mother's chair and, quite unobserved, sank down upon his knees to lay his brown and ruddy cheek against her hand.

The Queen started slightly, and then, raising her hand, she laid it upon Alfred's fair, curly locks and began to smoothe them.

"Why are you crying, mother?" whispered the boy at last, as he felt that he must say something, although he knew perfectly well the reason of his mother's sorrow.

"I am crying, Fred," she said, in a deep sad voice, "because the days go by and no messenger comes to tell me how the King your father fares; and more tears came, my boy, because now that I am in such pain and sorrow I find that my sons, instead of trying to be wise and thoughtful of their duties, grow more wild and wilful every day."

Alfred drew a deep catching breath which was first cousin to a sob, and the Queen went on:

"I want them to grow up wise and good, and I find that not only do they think of nothing except their own selfish ends, but they behave ill to one of the gentlest, kindest, and best of men—one who is as wise and learned as he is modest and womanly at heart. It makes mine sore, my son, at such a time as this, for there is nothing better nor greater than wisdom, my boy, and he who possesses it leads a double life whose pleasures are without end. But I am in no mood to scold and reproach you, Fred. You are the youngest and least to blame. Still, I had looked for better things of you all than that I should hear that you openly defy Father Swythe, and have made him come to me to say that he can do no more, and to ask to be dismissed. There, Fred, leave me now. I will talk to your brothers when they return from the chase."

Alfred's lips were apart, ready to utter words of repentance; but they seemed to stick on the way, leaving him dumb.

Feeling more miserable than ever, he stole out, looking guilty and wretched, and went straight into the garden for a reason of his own.

But it was not to pick flowers or to gather fruit. He wanted to see the gentle old monk; for he felt as if he could say to him what he could not utter to the Queen. But there was another disappointment awaiting him. Swythe was not there, and the boy stamped his foot angrily.

"Oh," he said, half aloud and angrily, "how unlucky I am!"

Just then there came as if out of one of the low windows looking upon the garden a deep-toned sound such as might have been made by a very big and musical bee, and the boy's face brightened as he turned and made for the door, crossed the hall, and then went down a stone passage, to stop at a door, whose latch he lifted gently, and looked in, letting out at once the full deep tones he had heard in the garden floating out of the open window.

There was Swythe sitting at a low table beneath the window with his back to him, singing a portion of a chant whose sweet deep tones seemed to chain the boy to the spot, as he listened with a very pleasurable sensation, and watched the monk busily turning a big flattened pebble stone round and round as if grinding something black upon a square of smoothly-polished slab.

Alfred watched eagerly, and his eyes wandered about the cell-like room devoted to Swythe—a very plain and homely place, with a stool or two and a large table beneath the window, while one side was taken up by the simple pallet upon which the monk slept.

All at once the chanting ceased, the grinding came to an end, and, as if conscious of someone being in the room, the monk turned his head, saw Alfred watching him, and smiled sadly.

"Ah, my son," he said; "back from the chase so soon?"

"No," said Alfred huskily. "I did not go."

"Not go?" said the monk, in surprise. "How was that? Ah! I see," he continued, for the boy was silent, "you and Ethelbald have quarrelled."

"No, indeed," cried Alfred, and then he stopped. The monk went on without looking, passing the pebble slowly round and round upon the slab, grinding up what looked like thin glistening black paste.

"Then why did you stay behind?" said the monk gravely.

"Because—because—because—oh, don't ask me!" cried the boy passionately.

Swythe fixed his eyes gently and kindly upon the boy, and left off grinding.

"Tell me why, Fred, my son," he said softly.

"Because of what Bald said and what you said; and then I went in and saw my mother, and she is so unhappy; and—and—"

Then, with a wild and passionate outburst, the boy made a dash at the old man and caught him by the shoulder, as he cried:

"Oh, Father Swythe, I do want to learn to read and to write, and be what you said. Please forgive me and help me, and I will try so hard—so very, very hard!"

"My son!" cried the monk, in a choking voice, and, as the boy was drawn tightly to the old man's breast and he hid his face so that his tears should not be seen, something fell pat upon the back of his head, making him look up quickly, to see that he need not feel ashamed of his own, for his tutor's tears were falling slowly, though there was a contented look in the old man's face.

"Yes," he said, smiling, "you have made me cry, my boy; but it is because you have made me happy. You have taught me that I have touched your young heart and opened the bright well-spring of the true and good that is in your nature. Fred, my boy," he continued, "you are too young to know it, so I will tell you: my son, you have just done something that is very brave and true."

"I?" cried the boy passionately, as he turned away his head. "I have behaved ill to you who have always been so kind and good, and made my mother weep for me when she is in such dreadful trouble without."

"And then, my boy, you have come straight to me, your teacher—the poor, weak, humble servant of his master, who

has always striven to lead you in the right way—and thrown yourself upon my breast and owned your fault. That is what I mean by saying you have done a very brave thing, my boy. There, and so you will try now?”

The last words came with a bright and cheerful ring, as Swythe released the boy and sat back smiling at him and looking proudly into his eyes.

“And so you want to learn to read and write and grow into a wise man who may some day rule over this land?”

“Oh, I want to learn!” cried the boy, dashing away his last tears. “I want to be wise and great; but oh, no: I don’t want to rule and be King. I want father to live till I am quite an old man.”

“I hope he will!” said Swythe, smiling, and nodding his head pleasantly, as the boy hurriedly turned the conversation by asking:

“What are you doing there?”

“Making some fresh ink, my boy,” was the reply.

“Ink? How?”

“Hah!” cried the monk, chuckling pleasantly; “now the vessel is opened and eager for the knowledge to be poured in. Question away, Fred, my son, and mine shall be the task to pour the wisdom in—as far as I have it,” he added, with a sigh.

Alfred stood at the great entrance late that afternoon when the loud barking of the dogs told of the young hunters’ return, and as soon as they came in sight Red cried:

“There, I told you so; Fred’s along with old Swythe.”

For the monk was standing by the boy’s side, waiting to see what success the young hunters had achieved.

They looked to see their brother disappointed and ready to upbraid them with going and leaving him behind; but they were surprised, for the boy saluted them with:

“Well, where’s the fat buck?”

"Oh," said Bald shortly, "we had a splendid run, but the dogs were so stupid that he managed to get away. But you ought to have been there: it was grand."

"Was it?" said Alfred coolly. The news did not seem to trouble him in the least. He noticed, though, that the three boys were so tired out that not one of them seemed to care for his supper, and directly after they went off to bed.

Chapter Five.

Beginning to be Great.

The boys had some fresh plan for the next day, and when Alfred went up to bed they were all whispering eagerly; but as soon as their brother entered the room they pretended to be asleep.

Alfred said nothing till he was undressed and about to get into his bed, and then he only wished them good night.

There was no reply, and the boy felt hurt; but just then he recollected something which made him clap his right hand first to his cheek and then to his forehead, as if he fully expected to find both places still wet and warm. They felt still as if his mother's lips had but just left them.

From that moment Alfred lay quite still in the darkness, feeling very happy and contented, till all at once a long-drawn restful sigh escaped his lips, and he was just dropping off to sleep when he awoke again and lay listening, for his three brothers, believing that he had gone off to sleep, began talking again in an eager whisper, but what about he could not tell, till all at once Red said something about "otters."

They were going to have a grand otter hunt up the little Wantage stream with the dogs; and for a few moments a feeling of bitter disappointment came over the boy, for he had looked forward to the day when that hunt would take place.

He felt better when he recalled the Queen's words as he wished her good night. They were:

"I am so glad, Fred, my boy. You have made me feel very happy."

"Father Swythe must have told her what I said," thought Alfred, and in another minute he was asleep.

The next morning after breakfast the boy did not feel half so brave, and he was thinking of how he could get away to the monk's quiet cell-like room without his brothers seeing him; but he was spared from all trouble in that way, for the monk came up to him smiling.

"I'm going to speak to your brothers, Fred," he said. "I told the Queen that you had promised to try very hard, and she said she was very glad, but she would be so much happier if your brothers came too; so I am going to ask them to come. Do you know where they are?"

"Out in the broad courtyard," said Alfred quickly; but Father Swythe shook his head.

"No," he said; "I came across just now, and they were not there."

At that moment the distant barking of a dog was heard; followed by a yelping chorus which made the boy run to the window and look out, to catch sight of three figures and some half-dozen dogs disappearing over the hill slope.

"I think they have gone after the otters with the dogs," said Alfred sadly.

"Oh, I see," said the monk; "and you feel dull because you are not with them?"

Alfred was too honest to deny it.

"Never mind, boy," said the little monk cheerily; "come to my room, and we'll finish making the ink, and then you can learn to read the letters as I make them, while I write out a poem for the Queen; and then I'll get out the red and blue and yellow, and the thin leaves of gold, and we'll try and make a beautiful big letter like those in the Queen's book, and finish it off with some gold."

"But you can't do that?" cried Alfred, interested at once.

"Perhaps not so well as in the Queen's beautiful book; but come and see."

The boy eagerly took hold of the monk's hand, and they were soon seated at the little table in Swythe's room, with the light shining full upon the slate slab, the pebble grinder, and the black patch.

"You said that was ink yesterday," said the boy, as Swythe gave the pebble a few turns round, and then looked to see if the ink was of the right thickness, which it was not, so a feather was dipped in a water-jug, and a few drops allowed to fall upon the black patch.

"There," said Swythe, "a good writer makes all his own ink. Now you grind that up till it is well mixed. Gently," cried Swythe; "that ink is too precious to be spread all over the slab. Grind it round and round. That's the way! That will do!"

As he spoke, Swythe took a thin-bladed knife and a good-sized, nicely-cleaned fresh-water mussel-shell, and let the boy carefully scrape up all the ink from the slab and place it in the shell.

"That's well done!" he said. "Now we'll write a line of letters."

"Yes," cried the boy; "let me write them."

"I wish you could, Fred, my boy," said the monk, smiling; "but you must first learn."

"That's what I want to do," cried the boy eagerly. "But how am I to learn?"

"By watching me. Now see."

Swythe rose from the table and opened a box, out of which he took a crisp clean piece of nearly transparent sheepskin and a couple of quill pens, sat down again, and then from another box he drew out a piece of lead and a flat ruler—not a lead-pencil such as is now used, but a little pointed piece of ordinary lead—with which he deftly made a few straight lines across the parchment, and then very carefully drew a beautiful capital A, which he finished off with scrolls and turns and tiny vine-leaves with a running stalk and half-a-dozen tendrils.

"But you have put no grapes," cried Alfred.

"Give me time," said Swythe good-humouredly, and directly after he faintly sketched in a bunch of grapes, broad at the top and growing narrower till it ended in one grape alone.

"Oh, I wish I could do that!" cried Alfred eagerly. "But I could never do it so well!"

"I'm going to persevere till I make you do it better," said Swythe. "Now we'll leave that for a bit and begin a Latin lesson."

Alfred sighed and looked longingly at the faint initial letter.

But his interest was taken up directly, for Swythe took up one of his quill pens, examined it, and then, after giving the ink a stir, dipped in his pen and tried it.

The next minute, while the boy sat resting his chin upon his hands, it seemed as if beautifully-formed tiny letters kept on growing out of the pen, running off at the point, and standing one after another in a row, almost exactly the same size, till four words stood out clearly upon the cream-coloured parchment.

As he formed the letters with his clever white fingers, Swythe repeated the name of each, pausing a little to give finish and effect as well as sound to the words he formed, till he had, after beginning some little distance in, made so many words upon one of the faintly-drawn lines and reaching right across the parchment.

"It's wonderful!" cried Alfred. "I could never do that!"

"It is not wonderful, and you soon will be able to do it," said Swythe; "but let's say all those words over again letter by letter, and then the words."

"They are Latin?" asked the boy.

"Yes," said Swythe, "and you are going to learn them so as to know them next time you see them."

Alfred shook his head, but he managed to repeat the Latin words straightforward, and after a while pick them out when asked. Then the monk proceeded to get out his colours so as to ornament the big initial letter of what Alfred had learned in Latin as well as in English was "The History of the Good King Almon."

Then came the most interesting part of the lesson, for, after Swythe had placed his colours ready—red, yellow, and blue—all in powders ground up so fine that it was necessary to shut out

the breeze which came in at the window, Alfred learned how the monk made his brushes, by taking a tuft of badger's hair and tying up one end carefully with a very fine thread of flax.

"Now watch me," said the old man, and Alfred looked closely while Swythe took a duck's quill out of a bunch, cut off the hollow part, and then lightly cut off the end where it had grown from the duck's wing. Then the tuft of badger's hair was held by its tied end and passed through the monk's lips so as to bring the hairs together to a point, which was carefully pushed into the most open part of the quill and screwed round till the whole of the tuft was inside. Then a thrust with a thin piece of wood sent the hairs right through, all but the tied-up ends; and Swythe held his work up in triumph—a complete little paint-brush.

"How clever!" cried the boy eagerly; "but how did you get that badger's hair?"

"Saved," said Swythe, "when the dogs killed that badger last year."

"And the ducks' quills?"

"I picked them up when the ducks were plucked by the scullion."

"You did not tell me how you made that black paint."

"By holding a piece of slate over the burning wick of the lamp till there was plenty of soot to be scraped off and mixed up with gum water made from plum-tree gum, the same as I am going to use to mix up these colours, you see."

As he spoke Swythe took a clean mussel-shell and placed in it a tiny portion of scarlet powder.

"That's a pretty colour!" said the boy. "What is it?"

"The colour made by burning some quicksilver and brimstone together in a very hot fire till it is red, and afterwards I grind it up into fine dust. Now," he said, "I'm going to mix this up with gum; and then we'll paint all the back of the parchment behind the big letter red."

Alfred watched the monk's clever touches with the point of his little brush till there was a great square patch upon which the letter seemed to stand.

"Beautiful!" cried Alfred. "Now it's done!"

"Oh, no," said Swythe; "that's the beginning! Now we'll paint the scroll."

"Why do you say *we*" said the boy. "It is you."

"It's we, because you are helping me," said the monk. "Very soon you will be doing letters like this, and then I shall help you."

Alfred sighed.

"Are you going to paint that scroll red too?"

"No: purple," was the reply, and Swythe took up another little packet, which he opened slowly.

"Why, that's blue," cried Alfred.

"Wait a moment!" said Swythe, taking up another clean mussel-shell, into which he put a tiny patch of the bright blue dust. "Now you shall see it turn purple."

Taking up the brush, whose hairs were thickly covered with red paint, he poured a few drops of gum water into the shell amongst the blue powder, mixed all together with the red brush, and to the boy's great delight a beautiful purple was the result.

Then the leaves that had been sketched in had to be done, and while the boy wondered another shell was taken, the brush carefully washed, and a little of the blue dust was mixed with some yellow, when there was a brilliant green, which the monk made brighter or darker by adding more yellow or more blue.

The big ornamental letter was now becoming very bright and gay, Alfred looking upon it as finished; but Swythe went on.

"It's very wonderful!" said the boy. "You seem as if you can make any colours out of red, yellow, and blue."

"So will you soon!" said Swythe, smiling, and still painting away, till at the end of a couple of hours, which seemed to have passed away like magic, the monk began to carefully clean his brush with water.

"That's done now!" cried Alfred, with a sigh of as much sorrow as pleasure, for he felt it to be a pity that the task was finished. "But do you know, Father Swythe," he continued, as he held his head on one side and looked critically at the staring white letter with its beautiful ornamentation, "I think if I could paint and painted that letter I shouldn't have left it all white like that."

"What would you have done, then?"

"I should have painted it deep yellow like a buttercup—a good sunny yellow, to look like gold."

"Well done!" cried the monk. "Why, that's exactly what it is going to be. It isn't finished, but I'm not going to paint it yellow. I'm going to paint it red first."

"I don't think I shall like that," said the boy, shaking his head.

"Wait and see!" said the monk, and once more mixing up a little red with gum he carefully painted the white letter scarlet, and held it up.

"There!" cried the boy triumphantly; "it looks now almost like the back patch, and you've spoiled it all."

"Umph!" grunted the monk, re-opening the window and laying his work in the sun to dry. "Wait a bit."

"Yes, I'll wait," said the boy, watching the shiny wet paint turn more and more dull; "but I don't like it."

Swythe washed his brush carefully again, and as soon as the paint was dry went carefully over the letter part with gum, so delicately that the red colour was not disturbed nor the background smeared.

"Yes," said the boy, still watching; "that looks a little better, because it looks shiny, but it was better white. Do paint it yellow now."

"I told you I'm going to make it yellow," said Swythe, laying his work well out in the sunshine to get thoroughly dry.

Then, taking it from the window-sill and shutting out the breeze again, Swythe placed his work ready and took out, from a snug corner, a tiny book made by sewing together about half-a-dozen leaves of parchment, and upon opening this very carefully Alfred saw within a piece of brilliant shining gold.

"Oh, how beautiful!" cried Alfred, making a dart at it with his hand. But, as if he expected this, Swythe put out his own hand and caught his pupil's just in time, creating such a breeze, though, that the very thin gold leaf rose up at the corner and fell over, doubling nearly in half.

"There, you see how fine it is!" cried Swythe.

"I'm very sorry—I did not know," said the boy sadly; and then he looked on in wonder, for the monk bent down, gave a gentle puff with his breath, and the gold was blown up, to fall back into its place.

"Why, I thought it would be quite hard and heavy," said Alfred.

"And it's twenty times as thin as the parchment!" said Swythe. "Now then, suppose we make the letter of gold."

Alfred did not speak, but watched with breathless interest while the monk took his knife and carefully cut a long strip off one edge of the gold leaf, and then, dividing it in four, took it up bit by bit on the blade, and laid the pieces along the letter, cutting off edges and scraps that were not wanted, and covering up bare places so carefully and with such great pains that at last there was not a trace left of the gummed letter, a rough, rugged gold one being left in its place.

"There!" cried Swythe, when he had covered the last speck, and all was gold leaf; but Alfred shook his head.

"It looks very beautiful," he said; "but I don't like it. The edges are all rugged and rough."

"So they are!" replied Swythe, and, taking now a clean dry brush, he began to smoothe and dab and press gently till there was not a trace left of where the scraps of gold joined or lay one over the other, all becoming strong and perfect excepting the edges, where the gold lay loose, till, quite satisfied with his work, the monk passed his brush briskly over the letter, carrying off every scrap of gold outside the gummed letter, and leaving this clean, smooth, and glistening.

"Oh, Father Swythe," cried Alfred, clapping his hands, "you are clever! It's beautiful!"

"You like it, then, my boy?" said the old man gravely. "You shall soon be able to do that with your light fingers."

The boy looked down at his hands and then took up the pen the monk had laid down, dipped it in the ink, and tried to make a letter.

"Well done," said Swythe, smiling; "that is something like O. Now make another, and try if you can make it worse than the last."

The boy looked up at him sharply.

"You are laughing at me!" he said.

"Well, if I am, it is only to make you try and do better. Go on again!"

The boy hesitated before looking hard at the letter he had tried to imitate, and then tried once more.

"Ever so much better!" cried the monk. "Come to me every day, and try like that, and in a very short time you will be able to read and write."

Chapter Six.

The Great White Horse.

Encouraged by these words of the monk and the smiles and praises of the Queen, Alfred made rapid progress, which, oddly enough, grew quicker still from the way in which Bald and his brothers ridiculed him and laughed at his attempts, for their gibes angered him, but only made him work the harder, and with results which Swythe told the Queen were wonderful. Six long weary weeks had passed away since Ethelwulf had gone with his little army against the Danes, and only once had news been received, so that Queen Osburga's face grew whiter, thinner, and more sad day by day, till one evening when, after a long hard day's work with the monk, the pair went up to the top of the highest hill near to watch for the appearance of a messenger. Swythe could see no sign of anything.

"There is no news," he said sadly. "Let us go back. The Queen is waiting to hear what we have found."

"There is news," cried the boy excitedly. "I can see the points of spears right away there in the valley. Look, the sun shines upon them and makes them glitter."

"Yes, I see now," cried Swythe excitedly. "Quick, let's try and run, boy. The Danes! The Danes! We must get the Queen away into the woods so as to be safe."

"Why not stop in the big house, and shut up every window and door? We must fight. You can fight, Father Swythe?"

"I, my boy?" said the monk sadly. "Yes, with my tongue. No, I am only a man of peace. All we can do is to fly for our lives. There are not twenty strong fighting-men, Fred, my son, and those who are coming against us must, from the spears and shining iron caps with wings like the Norsemen wear, be quite a thousand. Quick! You can go faster than I. Run on first and warn the good Queen that it is time to fly!"

Alfred nodded his head quickly and started off to run; but at that moment it struck him that it would be foolish to run and give the alarm without being sure. The monk had declared the force to be the enemy, but the boy wished to see for himself, and, darting sidewise, he ran down the hill, bearing to his right, till by stooping he could keep under cover of the gorse-bushes and approach quite near to the coming army.

It was a daring thing to do, for it might have ended in being made a prisoner without the chance of giving the alarm; but the brave act turned out to be quite wise, for when at last the boy had drawn near to the great body of armed men and crouched lower till he found a place through which he could peer cautiously, he sprang to his feet with a shout of joy.

For there in front rode his father, King Ethelwulf, mounted upon a sturdy horse, but so changed that he hardly knew him, for he was wearing a Danish helmet ornamented with a pair of grey gull's wings, half-opened and pointed back, while in his left hand he carried a Danish shield painted with a black raven, and in his right was a shining double battle-axe.

Alfred's cry was answered by a shout from the men, and Ethelwulf rode forward to meet his son, who grasped his extended hands and sprang up to sit in front of him upon the horse.

"Your mother—Osburga?" said the King hoarsely.

"Ill, father, because you do not come," cried the boy excitedly.

"Hah! Then she will soon be well," said the King, with a sigh of content. "Yonder is plump little Swythe coming to welcome me, I see," he continued; "but where are your brothers?"

"I don't know, father," replied the boy, innocently enough. "They have not come back from hunting, I think."

King Ethelwulf frowned, but said no more then, contenting himself with pressing forward to give his hand to Swythe, who had followed the boy as soon as he saw him change his course; and soon after the King's heart was gladdened by seeing Osburga with her train of women and serfs coming to meet them, answering the Saxon soldiers' cheers. But Bald, Bert, and Red had even then not come back from the chase.

That night the King told of the great victory which he had at last gained over the Danish invaders, who had been defeated with great slaughter near Farringdon, and it was in memory of that victory that the King returned to the battlefield with his men on a peaceful errand, and that was to use the spade instead of the battle-axe and sword, while they cut down through the green turf on one hill-side, right down to the clean, white, glistening chalk, after the lines had been marked out and the shape cleverly designed, working for weeks and weeks till there, on the slope they had carved out a huge white horse over a hundred yards in length—the Great White Horse of the Berkshire downs, which has remained as if galloping along until this day.

Year after year the scouring of that horse, as it is called, takes place, when men go and clear out the brown earth that has crumbled through frost and rain into the ditch-like lines which mark the horse's shape on the green hill-side, and make it stand out white and clear as ever.

No one will think it strange after what has been told that the youngest of those four boys grew up under Swythe's teaching wise and learned, and as brave as, or braver than, either of his three brothers, who, when at last King Ethelwulf died, succeeded in turn to be King of England. They each sat on the throne—Ethelbald, Ethelbert, and Ethelred; but their reigns were short, for in twenty years they too had passed away, to be succeeded by the strong, brave, and learned man who drove the Danish' invaders finally from the shores of England, or forced them to become peaceful workers of the soil. He was the brave warrior who never knew what it was to be conquered, but

tried again and again till the enemy fled before him and his gallant men.

Old chronicles tell many stories of his deeds—stories that have grown old and old—and they tell too that the studious boy's teacher Swythe became Bishop of Winchester and was called a saint, while old writers have worked up a legend about the rain christening the apples on Saint Swithin's Day, and when it does, keeping on sprinkling them for forty days more; but, like many other stories, that one is not at all true, as any young reader may find out by watching the weather year by year.

But that does not matter to us, who have to deal with Alfred the Little, and who willingly agree that as he grew up he was worthily given the name of Alfred the Great.
